

Ostensible Networks vs. Friendship Networks

I visited New York last weekend and although I'd physically been there many times before, this was the first time I felt like I'd really seen the city. Ostensibly, it's very easy to go to New York. There are lots of plane tickets available online and then you can book a hotel right there. I've done this many times before and every time I came away feeling like I hadn't really seen New York, but only bits and pieces made available for tourist consumption. I didn't feel like I understood the city.

It wasn't until this time, when I stayed with generous friends, that I felt I really saw the city. They showed me cute little places to eat, explained how to use the impossibly complex transit system, pointed me to maps and websites to help, recommended good spots to see at good times, and simply let me be with actual New Yorkers. I saw New York through the eyes of a New Yorker.

Now there are ostensible systems to help with all of these. There are guidebooks to recommend restaurants and infodesks and posters to explain how things work, but they never really can surpass the power of a friend.

If you look, you see ostensible networks everywhere. Ostensibly, jobs are posted in the want ads, but you can definitely snag one if you have a friend. Ostensibly, there are bureaucratic rules that must be followed, but usually can bypass them with a friend on the inside. Ostensibly, academic fields are learnable by anyone, but to really understand them you need a friend to take you through it. Ostensibly, web sites are supposed to be clear enough that anyone can use them, but for most of them you need a friend to show you how it's done.

A lot of people don't realize the importance of friendship networks. They think the world largely works the way it's ostensibly supposed to. You do good work, you follow the rules, you get noticed, you get the benefits. And when they fail to succeed or comprehend, it's probably because they're stupid or somebody isn't following the system. But it's neither of those, it's the system that's stupid — you don't succeed through hard work, you succeed through friendship networks.

This has clear implications for one's personal behavior: when you want to do something, don't follow the rules but look for a friend. (Sure, you could stay in a New York hotel — but you'd be much better off sleeping on the floor of a friend.) And build up lots of friends so that you'll be able to call on them when you need them. (Find a book you really like? Send the author a friendly note.)

But it also has systematic implications. Because our friendship networks are so skewed towards other's like us, making things dependent of friendship networks serves as a subtle form of discrimination and exclusion. A stranger in the middle of Nebraska will have a hard time learning Geology because they don't know any geologists. A writer living deep in Kansas will have a hard time getting their work published because few of the publishers have ever heard of them.

There are two ways to fight this. One is to be more generous about finding friends. Get to know random people who email you, talk to people on the plane or at the theater, take part in activities that go beyond your typical location and social stratum.

But these techniques can only go so far — despite my best efforts, I'll never be able to even consider being friends with the vast majority of the world's population. The better option is to help move things from friendship networks to ostensible networks, to document the cool places in New York City, to start websites where you can [find people to stay with](#), to not automatically give jobs and perks to friends, to build things clear enough that anyone can use them.

Sure, it can be hard to say no to a friend. But wouldn't you want someone to extend you the same courtesy?

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